



# UK Quality Code for Higher Education

## General Introduction

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) sets out the Expectations that all providers of UK higher education reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) are required to meet.

The purpose of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education is:

- to safeguard the academic standards of UK higher education
- to assure the quality of the learning opportunities that UK higher education offers to students
- to promote continuous and systematic improvement in UK higher education
- to ensure that information about UK higher education is publicly available.

The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK and UK higher education delivered internationally. It protects the interests of all UK higher education students regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

QAA regularly conducts reviews of UK higher education providers to ensure that they are meeting the Expectations set out in the Quality Code.

This document provides a technical introduction for users of the Quality Code. QAA has also produced an [introduction to quality assurance](#) for those with a more general interest in higher education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality)

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Throughout the text, hyperlinks indicate where further information is available, either elsewhere in this document or on other websites. Explanations of key terms can also be found in QAA's [glossary](#).<sup>2</sup>

The General Introduction is reviewed once a year by the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education Steering Group](#),<sup>3</sup> to ensure it remains up to date.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/glossary)

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/steering-group.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/steering-group.aspx)

## What is the UK Quality Code for Higher Education?

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education sets out the Expectations that all UK [higher education providers](#) are required to meet. It is the nationally agreed, definitive point of reference for all those involved in delivering higher education [programmes](#) which lead to a [qualification](#) or the award of academic credit from a UK [degree-awarding body](#), or are otherwise reviewed by QAA. All higher education providers are required to meet the Expectations of the Quality Code.

The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and UK higher education delivered internationally. It applies to providers with the power to [award their own degrees](#)<sup>4</sup> and to those who deliver higher education on behalf of another degree-awarding body or are otherwise reviewed by QAA. The Quality Code protects the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

The Quality Code gives individual higher education providers, who are independent and self-governing, a shared starting point for setting, describing and maintaining the [academic standards](#) of their higher education programmes and qualifications and for assuring the [quality of the learning opportunities](#) they provide for students. This makes it possible to ensure that higher education provision and outcomes are comparable and consistent at a [threshold](#) level across the UK.

The Quality Code relates to the learning and teaching activities of a higher education provider. Among the areas it does not cover are research (beyond the provision of research degree programmes), knowledge transfer activities and estates management. Higher education providers as autonomous bodies need to decide how they apply the Quality Code to their activities, in the context of a complex and innovative sector in which new developments take place all the time.

The Quality Code is UK-wide. However, responsibility for higher education is devolved to the separate administrations of the four nations of the UK. Different methods of external review operate to reflect different policy and historical contexts for higher education across the UK.

### Relationship to legislation

A number of topics covered by the Quality Code are also subject to legislation. The Quality Code does not interpret legislation nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Higher education providers have an overriding obligation in all such cases to ensure that they meet the requirements of legislation and any statutory requirements take precedence. When published, the Quality Code is compatible with existing legislation, but higher education providers are responsible for ensuring they continue to meet any legal requirements.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/DAP](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/DAP)

## What does the Quality Code contain?

### Expectations

Expectations express key principles that the higher education community has identified as essential for the assurance of academic standards and quality. They make clear what UK higher education providers are required to do, what they expect of themselves and each other, and what students and the general public can therefore expect of them. Individual providers are required to demonstrate they are meeting the Expectations effectively, through their own management and organisational processes, taking account of organisational needs, traditions, culture and decision-making.

### Indicators of sound practice

Indicators describe activities which higher education providers have agreed reflect sound practice, and through which higher education providers can demonstrate that they are meeting the relevant Expectation. Indicators are not designed to be used as a checklist; they are intended to help providers reflect on and develop their regulations, procedures and practices to demonstrate that the Expectations in the Quality Code are being met. The Indicators are grouped into clusters under a heading.

Expectations and Indicators are supported by explanatory notes that give more information, together with examples of how the Expectation or Indicator may be interpreted in practice. The application of any examples given will depend on the circumstances of a particular provider. The examples are best viewed as a stimulus to reflection and further development rather than as models for imitation.

The Quality Code also provides signposts to other resources which contain further information about how the Expectations may be met. It links together various sources of useful information without duplicating work already done. Each Part and Chapter contains extensive referencing to work undertaken by other bodies such as the [Higher Education Academy](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk)<sup>5</sup> and the [National Union of Students](https://www.nus.org.uk).<sup>6</sup>

### Overarching values

The overarching values of the Quality Code describe the characteristics that UK higher education providers are expected to demonstrate.

- Every student is treated fairly and with dignity, courtesy and respect.
- Every student has the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of their learning experience.
- Every student is properly and actively informed at appropriate times of matters relevant to their programmes of study.
- All policies and processes relating to study and programmes are clear and transparent.
- Strategic oversight of academic standards and academic quality is at the highest level of academic governance of the provider.
- All policies and processes are regularly and effectively monitored, reviewed and improved.
- Sufficient and appropriate external involvement exists for the maintenance of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.heacademy.ac.uk](https://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

<sup>6</sup> [www.nus.org.uk](https://www.nus.org.uk)

- All staff are supported, enabling them in turn to support students' learning experiences.

## Chapters

The Quality Code has three Parts, which are subdivided into Chapters:

- Part A: Setting and maintaining academic standards
  - A1: UK and European reference points for academic standards
  - A2: Degree-awarding bodies' reference points for academic standards
  - A3: Securing academic standards and an outcomes-based approach to academic awards
- Part B: Assuring and enhancing academic quality
  - B1: Programme design, development and approval
  - B2: Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education
  - B3: Learning and teaching
  - B4: Enabling student development and achievement
  - B5: Student engagement
  - B6: Assessment of students and the recognition of prior learning
  - B7: External examining
  - B8: Programme monitoring and review
  - B9: Academic appeals and student complaints
  - B10: Managing higher education provision with others
  - B11: Research degrees
- Part C: Information about higher education provision.

Part A contains seven Expectations with supporting explanatory notes; Part C and each Chapter in Part B contain a single Expectation and a series of Indicators of sound practice, accompanied by explanatory notes.

## Themes

Each Part and Chapter of the Quality Code considers and addresses the following overarching themes, as appropriate to the topic.

- How information about the topic is communicated to students and other relevant audiences.
- How the employability of students can be addressed in relation to the topic.
- How equality and diversity issues are embedded throughout.
- How the topic considers the needs of a diverse student body.
- How the responsibilities of degree-awarding bodies and other higher education providers differ in relation to the topic.
- How matters relating to the topic might differ in the four nations of the UK.
- How the content of the Chapter aligns with the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](https://www.engq.eu/pubs_esg.lasso)<sup>7</sup> and other European and international higher education reference points as appropriate.
- How good practice and enhancement relate to the topic, including reference to relevant publications such as [Enhancement Themes](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)<sup>8</sup> and [Outcomes... papers](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx),<sup>9</sup> and work by the Higher Education Academy.

<sup>7</sup> [www.engq.eu/pubs\\_esg.lasso](https://www.engq.eu/pubs_esg.lasso)

<sup>8</sup> [www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk](http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk)

<sup>9</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/Pages/Outcomes.aspx)

## Why does the UK need a Quality Code for Higher Education?

UK higher education providers are autonomous and increasingly diverse. The student body within UK higher education is also increasingly varied, and there are many different ways in which students learn. The Quality Code provides consistent principles and practices and a common vocabulary for the management of academic standards and quality. It can be interpreted locally as appropriate to individual higher education providers' missions. In this way it provides safeguards for students, the whole UK higher education sector and the general public, without damaging the diversity that is inherent in UK higher education by demanding rigid uniformity of practice.

The Quality Code also forms the basis for the reviews of higher education providers that are carried out by the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\)](#).<sup>10</sup> It provides a reference point against which providers can be judged and QAA's reviews determine whether higher education providers are meeting the Expectations which the Quality Code sets out.

## How has the Quality Code been developed?

The Quality Code replaces the Academic Infrastructure, the set of reference points developed by QAA in partnership with the higher education sector largely in response to the recommendations of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education chaired by Lord Dearing in 1997. Following [an evaluation and period of consultation](#)<sup>11</sup> with the sector, QAA has restructured the Academic Infrastructure into the Quality Code so that it remains fit for purpose and able to meet the challenges facing UK higher education. QAA works with the higher education sector to develop and maintain the Quality Code.

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<sup>10</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review)

<sup>11</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/AcademicInfrastructure/Pages/AI-consultation-findings.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/AcademicInfrastructure/Pages/AI-consultation-findings.aspx)

## **Who is the Quality Code for?**

### **Higher education providers**

The Quality Code applies to all providers of higher education programmes that lead to a qualification or the award of academic credit from a UK degree-awarding body, or are otherwise reviewed by QAA. However, there is a distinction between higher education providers with degree awarding powers (who have responsibility for setting and maintaining the standards of qualifications), and providers without degree awarding powers (who contribute to maintaining the standards of the qualifications of the degree-awarding body). The power to award degrees carries with it certain responsibilities, and this distinction is reflected within the Quality Code through the use of the term [degree-awarding body](#) where necessary.

Higher education providers use the Quality Code to help them to set and maintain the academic standards of their programmes and qualifications, assure and enhance the quality of the learning opportunities they make available and provide information about higher education. The Quality Code makes clear what is expected of all higher education providers, as well as providing guidance on sound practice, but does not require or wish to encourage narrow compliance.

The Quality Code expects that all higher education providers consciously, actively and systematically assure the academic standards of their programmes and qualifications and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide. Taking into account the Quality Code's principles and practices, which have been agreed across the UK, each higher education provider develops its own systems for independent verification both of its academic standards and quality of its provision and of the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems.

### **Specialist staff with responsibility for academic standards and quality**

The Quality Code provides technical guidance for staff in higher education providers with responsibility for the setting and maintenance of academic standards and assurance and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. It is designed as a specialist tool for those managing higher education provision. The guidance the Quality Code contains will often be embedded within individual providers' policies and processes.

### **The wider community of higher education staff**

Academic and professional staff in faculties and departments are expected to be familiar with the policies that the Quality Code informs and any parts of the Quality Code that are particularly relevant to their own responsibilities. While the wider community of higher education staff do not necessarily need to be aware of the detail of the whole Quality Code, it is expected that they would make use of it when carrying out particular activities, such as designing new programmes or determining the nature of support for student learning.

### **Student representatives**

Student representatives, including officers of student representative bodies (such as a students' union), will find the Quality Code particularly useful in their discussions with their higher education provider, as it sets out the threshold expectations for the quality of the learning opportunities the provider makes available to its students.

## Students and the wider public

The Quality Code provides an important basis for comparability and consistency in provision and outcomes at a threshold level across the UK higher education sector. In this way it provides safeguards for students, the whole UK higher education sector and the general public.

For those with a more general interest in higher education, QAA has worked with the National Union of Students to develop a [guide](#) which explains how various quality assurance processes work together to safeguard academic standards and protect the interests of students across UK higher education.<sup>12</sup> In addition a [brief guide](#) to the Quality Code itself is available on the QAA website.<sup>13</sup>

## QAA reviewers

Reviewers carrying out the [external reviews](#)<sup>14</sup> of higher education providers coordinated by QAA use the Quality Code as a reference point for judging whether an individual higher education provider is meeting the nationally agreed Expectations for academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities, enhancement and information about their higher education provision.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality)

<sup>13</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/corporate/Policies/Documents/A%20brief%20guide.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/corporate/Policies/Documents/A%20brief%20guide.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review)



## Who owns the Quality Code?

The Quality Code is owned by the UK higher education sector and is published and maintained by QAA on its behalf. QAA works in collaboration with the sector in developing and maintaining the Quality Code, to ensure that it represents Expectations on which the higher education sector has agreed.

## Who is responsible for implementing the Quality Code?

Individual higher education providers are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards of their programmes and the quality of the learning opportunities they offer to students. In discharging this responsibility, they are required to meet the Expectations of the Quality Code.

## The role of QAA

QAA provides assurance for the wider public that higher education providers are meeting the Expectations set out in the Quality Code by conducting regular external reviews. During these external reviews higher education providers are required to provide evidence that they are meeting the Expectations set out in the Quality Code. They do so by demonstrating the effectiveness of the design and operation of their particular organisational policies and processes for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of higher education programmes and qualifications and the quality of the learning opportunities offered to their students.

Detailed explanations of how the Quality Code is used within each of the review methods operated by QAA can be found in the individual method handbooks. Each review method is designed to reflect the context of different types of UK higher education providers and the different nations of the UK. As each Part and Chapter of the Quality Code is revised or developed, a date for implementation of the updated version as a reference point in review is set.

## The role of the higher education funding bodies

The UK higher education funding bodies have a statutory responsibility to make provision for assessing (and in Scotland, enhancing) the quality of education which they fund. They fulfil this responsibility by contracting with QAA to conduct external reviews of higher education providers. Where these reviews demonstrate ongoing failure to address unsatisfactory quality of management of academic standards and/or quality of the learning opportunities available to students, sanctions may be taken by the funding bodies.

Further information about the higher education funding bodies is available from their websites:

- Higher Education Funding Council for England, [www.hefce.ac.uk](http://www.hefce.ac.uk)
- Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, [www.hefcw.ac.uk](http://www.hefcw.ac.uk)
- Scottish Funding Council, [www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk)
- Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland, [www.delni.gov.uk](http://www.delni.gov.uk).

## Equality and diversity

The Quality Code promotes an inclusive approach by embedding consideration of equality and diversity matters throughout. The essence of equality is treating everyone with equal dignity and respect, and valuing people regardless of their background or the group or groups to which they belong. An inclusive environment for learning anticipates individual difference and aims to ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities, through inclusive design wherever possible and through reasonable individual adjustments where necessary.

The following key principles underpin the approach to equality and diversity adopted in the Quality Code.

- Educational disadvantage and exclusion is not an inevitable result of membership of particular groups, but arises from social, attitudinal and environmental barriers.
- No student is placed at a disadvantage as a result of their particular requirements or background.

Putting these principles into practice means:

- higher education providers take steps to remove barriers to student participation in all aspects of the academic and social life of the higher education provider
- senior managers, including those at the highest levels, lead the promotion of equality, including developing inclusive policy and practice which aims to enhance the experience of every student.

The approach to equality and diversity adopted in the Quality Code reflects wider developments, including the principles underlying the [Equality Act 2010](#) (the Act), but it is not limited to the scope of the Act, applying for example where UK higher education is delivered internationally (see Annex). The Quality Code uses the term 'students with protected characteristics' where it is necessary to indicate that in order to ensure equal access to educational opportunities, consideration may need to be given to the requirements of students in particular groups. The terminology is adopted from the Act, where the protected characteristics specified are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (ethnic origin or national identity), religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex, and sexual orientation. However, in the Quality Code the term may be used in circumstances which are not covered by legislation.

Further information on the Equality Act is available from the Equality Challenge Unit, [www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk).

## Academic standards, quality, enhancement and information

The four areas covered by these terms form the underlying structure of all QAA's methods of external review. While in many ways they are inextricably linked, in order for the Quality Code to be useful as a tool for higher education providers, it is necessary to make the distinctions set out here and which are reflected in the structure of the Quality Code.

**Threshold academic standards** are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for a qualification or the award of academic credit. For equivalent qualifications, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK and is described by the qualifications descriptors set out in the [national frameworks for higher education qualifications](#).<sup>15</sup>

**Academic standards** are the standards that individual degree-awarding bodies set and maintain for the award of their academic credit or qualifications. These may exceed the threshold academic standards.

Threshold academic standards define the minimum standards which degree-awarding bodies must use to make the award of qualifications at a particular level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications. Threshold academic standards are distinct from the standards of performance that a student needs to demonstrate to achieve a particular classification of a qualification. These standards of performance are the academic standards for which individual degree-awarding bodies are responsible.

Individual degree-awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that UK threshold academic standards are met in their qualifications by aligning programme learning outcomes with the relevant qualification descriptors in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications. They are also responsible for defining their own academic standards by setting the pass marks and determining the grading/marking schemes and any criteria for classification of qualifications that differentiate between levels of student achievement above and below the threshold academic standards. Student achievements will reflect the specific content, delivery and assessment of the programmes they have undertaken and this diversity is a strength of UK higher education provision.

Higher education providers, and particularly degree-awarding bodies, use the Quality Code as a tool when designing and approving programmes and setting their academic standards. The Quality Code sets out the Expectations which higher education providers are required to meet to ensure that processes for the approval of programmes are rigorous and include the involvement of subject specialists external to the provider, and which contribute to the effective monitoring of **comparability of threshold academic standards**, including fair and transparent setting and marking of assessment tasks, the robust use of external examiners and regular monitoring and review of programmes. This enables students and the general public to have confidence that the achievement represented by a higher education qualification will be broadly comparable with others in similar subject areas.

**Academic quality** is concerned with how well the learning opportunities made available to students enable them to achieve their qualification. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided. In order to achieve a higher education qualification, students participate in the learning opportunities made available to them by their higher education provider. A provider guarantees the quality of the opportunities it provides, but it cannot guarantee how any particular student will experience those opportunities. By ensuring that its policies, structures and processes for

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<sup>15</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/Quality-Code-Part-A.aspx)

the management of learning opportunities are implemented effectively, a higher education provider also ensures the effectiveness of its outcomes.

**Enhancement** is the process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. This can take place in different ways and at different levels, but a higher education provider needs to be aware that it has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities and to have policies, structures and processes in place to detect where improvement is necessary. Willingness to consider enhancement is embedded throughout the higher education provider, but stems from a high-level awareness of the need to consider improvement. Quality enhancement naturally forms part of effective quality assurance, and consequently guidance on possible approaches to enhancement is embedded throughout the Quality Code. Specific definitions of enhancement exist for the purposes of QAA's review methods.

One of the ways in which public confidence in the value of higher education can be promoted is by higher education providers producing appropriate **information**, focused on their intended audiences, about the higher education learning opportunities they offer. Providers produce information about their UK higher education provision for a variety of audiences and purposes. Some of this information is of direct interest to the public at large and accessible to and retrievable by anyone. Other information may be of a more specialist, detailed nature and relevant to more limited audiences, such as prospective or current students or those who have completed their studies. Confidence in academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities hinges upon the trustworthiness of such information.

## Terminology used throughout the Quality Code

In order to provide consistency within the Quality Code, the following terminology is used throughout. The text below explains in what sense these key terms are used within the Quality Code, recognising that meanings may vary across the UK higher education sector. QAA's [glossary](#) provides explanations of other terms which may be unfamiliar to some readers.<sup>16</sup> Higher education providers may use different terminology to that adopted in the Quality Code or use the same terminology in different ways, reflecting their individual history and approach.

All providers of programmes which lead to a qualification or the award of academic credit from a UK degree-awarding body, or are otherwise reviewed by QAA, are required to meet the Expectations set out in the Quality Code. **Expectations** articulate what all UK higher education providers expect of each themselves and each other and what students and the general public can therefore expect of all higher education providers. They express key principles that the higher education community has identified as essential in assuring academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

**Higher education provider** is used throughout as a generic term for those who deliver programmes which lead to a qualification or the award of academic credit from a UK degree-awarding body, or is otherwise reviewed by QAA. Higher education is defined as provision which leads to an qualification at levels 4-8 of *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* or levels 7-12 of *The Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

Higher education providers are expected to act in accordance with the limits of their [degree awarding powers](#) and/or responsibilities as providers of higher education.<sup>17</sup> The power to award degrees is regulated by law in the UK. It is an offence for an organisation to purport to award, or to offer to award a UK degree, unless it is authorised to do so. Degree-awarding bodies are also known as recognised bodies and are listed at [www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees-recognised-bodies](http://www.gov.uk/recognised-uk-degrees-recognised-bodies). **Degree-awarding body** is used in the Quality Code where it is necessary to differentiate higher education providers who have the power to award degrees, and consequently, other higher education qualifications or academic credit towards higher education qualifications. In some circumstances it is necessary to make a distinction between those providers who hold research degree awarding powers, those who hold taught degree awarding powers, and those who hold Foundation Degree awarding powers. The Expectations of the Quality Code apply to all provision leading to a qualification of a degree-awarding body, whether it is delivered by the degree-awarding body itself or by another organisation.

Higher education providers may also offer programmes leading to qualifications of **awarding organisations**. Where this provision is reviewed by QAA, the Expectations of the Quality Code apply, although an individual provider's responsibilities in relation to academic standards will be set out by the relevant awarding organisation(s). Examples of awarding organisations include the Scottish Qualifications Authority and EdExcel, who offer Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs).

The hierarchical organisational levels which typically exist within a higher education provider are referred to (from smallest to largest) as **department**, **faculty** (which may also encompass schools or colleges in the organisational structure of some providers) and **provider** or **organisation**.

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<sup>16</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/glossary)

<sup>17</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/DAP](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/DAP)

In the Quality Code, **programme** is used to describe any stand-alone, approved curriculum followed by a student, which contributes to a qualification of a degree-awarding body or otherwise carries academic credit where credit is used. The provision may be of any length or credit value, and includes pre-defined programmes leading to a specific qualification, multidisciplinary programmes, pathways through a modular scheme, short periods of study leading to the award of academic credit, as well as programmes where the specific content is negotiated between the higher education provider and an individual student.

Where a programme is made up of more than one self-contained, formally structured unit, these units are described as **modules**. **Subject** is used to describe a specific academic field of study.

In general, **qualification** is used to describe the formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended learning outcomes and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set by a degree-awarding body or awarding organisation. This may also include the award of certificated academic credit, where credit is used.

**Students disadvantaged by a protected characteristic** is used where it is necessary to indicate that in order to ensure equal access to educational opportunities, consideration may need to be given to the requirements of students in particular groups. The terminology is adopted from the Equality Act (2010), where the protected characteristics specified are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race (ethnic origin or national identity), religion or belief (including lack of belief), sex, and sexual orientation. However, in the Quality Code the term may be used in circumstances which are not covered by legislation.

## What other resources might be useful?

*What is quality assurance?* A general guide to how quality assurance processes work together to safeguard academic standards and protect the interests of students across UK higher education.

[www.gaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality](http://www.gaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/what-is-quality)

Universities UK

*Quality and standards in UK universities: A guide to how the system works*

[www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications/pages/quality-and-standards-in-UK-universities-a-guide-to-how-the-system-works.aspx](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/publications/pages/quality-and-standards-in-UK-universities-a-guide-to-how-the-system-works.aspx)

Leadership Foundation for Higher Education

*Getting to grips with academic standards, quality, and the student experience*

[www.lfhe.ac.uk/filemanager/root/site\\_assets/research\\_resources/g2q/G2G%20Academic%20Standards.pdf](http://www.lfhe.ac.uk/filemanager/root/site_assets/research_resources/g2q/G2G%20Academic%20Standards.pdf)

Higher Education Academy

[www.heacademy.ac.uk](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk)

National Union of Students

[www.nus.org.uk](http://www.nus.org.uk)

Equality Challenge Unit

[www.ecu.ac.uk](http://www.ecu.ac.uk)

ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education)

*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*

[www.enqa.eu/pubs\\_esg.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso)

This section will continue to be updated as other resources are published.

## Annex: The application of the Quality Code

### Application in the four nations of the UK

The Quality Code is UK-wide, reflecting the strong level of integration and coherence within the UK higher education sector. However, in certain circumstances aspects of the Quality Code may not apply to the whole of the UK in the same way. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, there are some long-standing traditional differences in the structure and operation of elements of the higher education systems of the different nations, particularly in Scotland (reflected for example in the separate qualifications framework). Secondly, higher education is one of the areas where responsibility for public policy has been devolved from the Westminster parliament to the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish parliaments or assemblies. As a result, aspects of policy relating to higher education, such as tuition fees and funding and governance arrangements take different forms in the different countries.

#### Higher education in further education in Scotland

In Scotland, the main forms of vocational higher qualifications are Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs). The vast majority of these qualifications are owned and validated by the [Scottish Qualifications Authority](http://www.sqa.org.uk) (SQA), which is directly responsible for the academic standards of these qualifications.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the [Scottish Funding Council](http://www.sfc.ac.uk),<sup>19</sup> which is responsible for both further and higher education provision, has contracted separately with [Education Scotland](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk)<sup>20</sup> (formerly Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education) to conduct external quality reviews of Scotland's college sector, while contracting with QAA to conduct reviews of higher education institutions.

Therefore, in Scotland, the Quality Code applies to higher education provision which leads to a qualification of a designated higher education institution. It may be delivered by the higher education institution itself or by a further education college. The Quality Code does not apply to provision in colleges leading to HNCs or HNDs awarded by SQA. Where higher education institutions offer HNCs or HNDs (for example the University of the Highlands and Islands), the Expectations of the Quality Code will apply to the quality of the learning opportunities made available to students, but responsibility for the academic standards of the qualifications continues to rest with the awarding body (typically SQA).

#### Application of the Quality Code to foundation provision

The Expectations of the Quality Code apply where a student is following a programme of study which ultimately leads to a qualification or the award of academic credit at levels 4-8 of *The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* or levels 7-12 of *The Framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*. This includes integrated foundation year programmes which are designed to enable entry to a specified degree programme or programmes on successful completion. In these cases, it may be necessary to use other external reference points in addition to the Quality Code to set academic standards for the foundation element. If the foundation provision is free-standing, and does not have a direct relationship with a specified higher education programme, it is not covered by the Quality Code, but may be subject to other regulatory requirements.

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<sup>18</sup> [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

<sup>19</sup> [www.sfc.ac.uk](http://www.sfc.ac.uk)

<sup>20</sup> [www.educationscotland.gov.uk](http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk)



## **Application of the Quality Code outside the UK**

When higher education leading to an qualification of a UK degree-awarding body is delivered internationally, the environment in which students study may be characterised by different cultural norms. Different legal and regulatory frameworks will also apply. These factors need to be taken into account by higher education providers in order to ensure they can continue to demonstrate that they meet the Expectations of the Quality Code. In particular, a reasoned and deliberate decision underpins any compromise in relation to the principles of equality and diversity.